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Introduction: the European Semester as a new architecture of EU socioeconomic governance in theory and practice

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ABSTRACT

The ‘European Semester’, a new framework for policy co-ordination across European Union (EU) member states, represents a major step in EU governance. Created in 2010 in the wake of the financial and sovereign debt crises and revamped in 2015, it was intended to provide a new socioeconomic governance architecture to co-ordinate national policies without transferring full sovereignty to the EU level. This introduction offers a brief overview and assessment of the European Semester, examining its implications along three critical axes, running respectively between the economic and the social, the supranational and the intergovernmental, and the technocratic and democratic poles of EU governance. We introduce and briefly summarize the seven other contributions that make up this collection. Our conclusions are that the European Semester challenges established theoretical understandings of EU governance, as it is a prime example of the complexity that supersedes simple polar oppositions.

KEYWORDS Democracy; European Semester; intergovernmentalism; policy co-ordination; socioeconomic governance; supranationalism; technocracy

1. Introduction

The ‘European Semester’ (hereafter ‘Semester’) is a new governance architecture for socioeconomic policy co-ordination in the European Union (EU). Created in 2010 in the wake of the financial and sovereign debt crises, the Semester has been periodically revamped, most significantly by the Juncker Commission in 2015. Its procedures build on, but also reformulate, the EU’s pre-existing processes of fiscal, economic, employment and social policy co-ordination, as these had developed during the 1990s and 2000s, including the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP), the Broad Economic Policy Guidelines

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(BEPGs), the European Employment Strategy (EES), the Lisbon Strategy and the Social Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC). The Semester was introduced as part of a panoply of far-reaching measures aimed at reinforcing EU economic governance in response to the euro crisis: the so-called 'Six-Pack', 'Two-Pack' and 'Fiscal Compact'. These measures included stronger and more 'automatic' sanctions for the SGP's Excessive Deficit Procedure (EDP); a new Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure (MIP) for detecting and correcting non-fiscal imbalances (e.g., in the housing market or current account) that could negatively affect other member states, based on a scoreboard of economic indicators, in-depth country reviews and recommendations, with financial sanctions for persistent non-compliance; *ex ante* review by the Commission of euro area national budgets; and Reverse Qualified Majority Voting (RQMV) for overturning Commission proposals under the excessive deficit and imbalance procedures. The Semester was also intended to serve as the governance architecture for 'thematic co-ordination' of member state policies towards the 'smart, sustainable and inclusive growth' objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy, which was explicitly designed to have a stronger social dimension than the preceding Lisbon Strategy, including specific guidelines and targets on poverty and social inclusion.¹

The Semester brings together within a single policy co-ordination cycle a variety of EU governance instruments with different legal bases, from the SGP, MIP and Fiscal Compact to the Europe 2020 Strategy and the Integrated Economic and Employment Policy Guidelines. In this cycle, the Commission, the Council of the EU (hereafter: Council) and the European Council set priorities for the Union; review national performance, budgets and reform programmes; and issue Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs), backed up in some cases by possible financial sanctions. Each member state receives a single integrated set of CSRs, except for those under a bailout programme (as in the case of Greece). The CSRs cover a wide range of policy fields, including issues such as wage determination, education and health care, which fall under the primary competence of member states and where the Union's legislative powers are severely limited. Although the Semester involves no legal transfer of sovereignty from the member states to the EU level, it has given the EU institutions a more visible and authoritative role than ever before in monitoring, scrutinizing and guiding national economic, fiscal and social policies, especially within the euro area.

The Semester in its current form begins each November with the Commission's Annual Growth Survey (AGS), which identifies the key reform priorities for the EU and offers general policy guidance to the member states for the coming year. The 'autumn package' includes the Commission's Alert Mechanism Report, which designates member states for MIP In-Depth Reviews (IDRs), its opinion on euro area draft budgets and proposed recommendations for the euro area as a whole, as well as the Joint Employment Report (which

also covers social issues). In February, the Commission publishes detailed Country Reports laying out its analysis of the key challenges and reform progress of each member state, including the conclusions of the MIP IDRs, which are preceded and followed by intensive dialogue with national governments and stakeholders. Based on the AGS and subsequent Council conclusions, the March European Council adopts socioeconomic priorities and policy orientations for the Union. By early April, the member states submit their National Reform Programmes (NRPs) and fiscal Stability or Convergence Programmes. In May, the Commission assesses these programmes and proposes CSRs, which in turn are reviewed and sometimes amended by committees of member state officials preparing the work of the Council, based on multilateral implementation reviews of national reforms. The revised CSRs are then endorsed by the European Council and adopted by the Council in late June/early July. The European Parliament (EP) adopts resolutions and reports on the AGS and the CSR each year, and may invite the Presidents of the Commission, Council, European Council and Eurogroup to discuss the Semester through the so-called 'Economic Dialogue'.² For a schematic depiction of this process, see the Online Appendix.

Many observers believe that the European Semester represents a fundamental shift in EU socioeconomic governance. This collection analyses the changes introduced by the Semester and considers their consequences for the evolution of EU governance along three critical axes: the economic and the social; the supranational and the intergovernmental; and the technocratic and the democratic. Questions addressed under these rubrics include whether the Semester is leading to the subordination of EU social objectives and actors to economic imperatives of fiscal consolidation and competitiveness; whether EU socio-economic governance is becoming more supranational or more intergovernmental; and whether the Semester is promoting technocratic expert-based governance at the expense of democratic deliberation and accountability.

The contributions in this collection assess these critical dimensions of the Semester based on first-hand empirical research into its practical operation, without adopting a single unified theoretical perspective. Some focus primarily on the socioeconomic axis (Zeitlin and Vanhercke, Bekker, Eihmanis), others more on the supranational–intergovernmental axis (Maricut and Puetter, Savage and Howarth), and still others on the technocratic–democratic axis (Hallerberg *et al.*, Crum), though many deal with more than one axis and all address the Semester's impact on the changing governance relationship between the EU institutions and the member states. The contributors employ a variety of conceptual lenses, including new/deliberative intergovernmentalism (Maricut and Puetter), principal–agent analysis (Savage and Howarth), actor-centred constructivism and the 'usages of Europe' (Zeitlin and Vanhercke, Eihmanis), Europeanization (Hallerberg *et al.*), two-level

games and normative democratic theory (Crum). The contributions also adopt different methodological and data-gathering approaches, from original surveys (Hallerberg *et al.*) to semi-structured interviews with key policy actors and content analysis of primary documents (at both EU and national levels). Taken together, they offer an authoritative state-of-the-art analysis of the Semester's implications for the evolution of EU socioeconomic governance since the crisis. In what follows, we review the literature on the Semester, introduce the individual contributions, and highlight the collection's most salient findings.

2. Literature review

The existing literature on the European Semester has focused on a number of major issues. One key theme in the early literature was how to characterize the balance within the Semester between 'hard', rules-based elements derived from the SGP and 'softer', more deliberative forms of policy co-ordination associated with the OMC, with authors such as Armstrong (2013) and Bekker (2013) emphasizing the hybrid character of the emerging governance architecture. Another preoccupation has been to assess the Semester's effectiveness, especially by looking at national implementation of the CSRs. A number of authors have criticized the member states' limited response to the CSRs, with Darvas and Leandro (2015) claiming that their annual rate of implementation declined over time (from 40 per cent to 29 per cent) and was lower than the unilateral recommendations of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (*cf.* also EP 2017; Hallerberg *et al.* 2011). Other studies, notably by the Commission, find a higher cumulative rate of implementation, with two-thirds of CSRs showing at least 'some progress' by 2016, reflecting the longer time horizon needed for major structural reforms (Deroose and Griesse 2014; European Commission 2017a: 4–7). But more thorough assessments of the Semester's causal influence on national reforms require a different research approach, based on comparative process tracing of the interplay between EU and domestic policy-making, as in Eihmanis's pioneering study of Latvia (2017).

Many scholars have argued that the Semester's governance architecture inherently privileges economic goals and actors over their social counterparts (e.g., Copeland and Daly 2015; Crespy and Menz 2015; de la Porte and Heins 2015). Others have found instead that this more integrated socioeconomic co-ordination process offers new opportunities for defending and 'mainstreaming' EU social objectives (e.g., Bekker [2015]; Gómez Urquijo [2017]; Jessoula [2015]; for a fuller review, see Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2017). The coming of the Semester and other economic and financial governance innovations adopted in response to the euro crisis has likewise triggered a major debate about whether these should be characterized as primarily

intergovernmental or supranational. Scholars such as Bickerton *et al.* (2015) point to increased European integration in these areas without transferring powers to supranational institutions, which they term ‘new’ intergovernmentalism (*cf.* also Puetter 2014). Others point instead to the emergence of a ‘new supranationalism’ (Dehousse 2016), resulting from the enhanced role of the Commission and the ECB in the EU’s post-crisis economic governance (Bauer and Becker [2014]; Savage and Verdun [2016]; for a fuller review of the debate, see Schmidt [2016]).

Finally, many authors have expressed deep concern about the European Semester as part of a broader set of measures introduced by the EU during the sovereign debt crisis which have shifted governance responsibilities away from democratic institutions, such as parliaments, into the hands of unelected and unaccountable technocrats (e.g., Chalmers *et al.* [2016]; Crum and Curtin [2015]; Dawson [2015]; Scharpf [2013]; for a fuller review, see Crum 2017). Ironically, however, careful process-tracing research shows that it was the EP rather than the Commission that pushed hardest for the inclusion of the Semester and RQMV in the Six-Pack legislation (Chang 2013: 264–5; Laffan and Schlosser 2016: 240).

3. Our contribution

The next contribution in this collection, by Jonathan Zeitlin and Bart Vanhercke 2017, provides a detailed analysis of the ‘socialization’ of the Semester since 2011, defined as a growing emphasis on social objectives in its substantive policy messages (including the CSRs) and an enhanced role for social and employment actors in its monitoring, review and decision-making procedures. Drawing on ‘actor-centred constructivism’ and the ‘usages of Europe’ approaches, the authors show how EU social and employment actors – especially committees of national officials advising the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs (EPSCO Council) – have helped to change the ‘rules of the game’ and influence the positions of their economic policy interlocutors within the Semester. These actors have reflexively revised their own working methods and styles of argument to gain traction in ‘evidence-based’ deliberation, while successfully pushing back against the Commission’s perceived efforts to impose uniform, over-prescriptive recommendations. As a result, the authors argue, not only has the integration of EU social and economic policy co-ordination within the Semester become more balanced, but its governance has also become more interactive and less hierarchical.

The third contribution, by Sonja Bekker 2017, examines the role within the Semester of ‘flexicurity’ as a leading EU policy concept developed before the crisis aimed at reconciling flexibility and security in labour markets. Many commentators have claimed that austerity measures adopted during the

crisis led to the abandonment of flexicurity for a one-sided emphasis on flexibility in EU labour-market policies. Based on a systematic content analysis of key policy documents and CSRs, Bekker shows instead that flexicurity is not only alive and well within the Semester, but has been revitalized by incorporating a wider range of social concerns (such as a lifecycle approach to social security and improving transitions into stable jobs), in line with Zeitlin and Vanhercke's 'socialization' thesis. This redefinition of the concept, in her view, demonstrates the Semester's adaptability over time to changing policy priorities, alongside its capacity to tailor CSRs to the variety of challenges facing member states through different combinations of flexicurity elements.

The fourth contribution, by Adina Maricut and Uwe Puetter [2017](#), investigates the relationship between the economic and social dimensions of the Semester. Drawing on new/deliberative intergovernmentalist approaches, they argue that the uneven evolution of the Semester's co-ordination infrastructure has produced an asymmetry between economic and social issues. Not only are finance ministers better placed to build consensus through informal policy dialogue than their social and employment policy colleagues, but they also have better access to the European Council and greater control of the Semester's policy priorities. Yet the authors also find that the Commission and the committees advising social and employment ministers have managed to gain a greater expert role in the Semester and to integrate more social issues into the CSRs, even if this did not always lead to stronger political endorsement by the European Council. Their analysis suggests that ongoing asymmetries between economic and social issues within the Semester are rooted less in their different Treaty bases than in contingent and corrigible differences in the organization of the actors in the two domains, notably the more fragmented structure of the EPSCO Council, its less frequent meetings, and its insistence on conducting policy debates in televised public meetings rather than behind closed doors.

The fifth contribution, by James D. Savage and David Howarth [2017](#) employs a principal-agent approach to analyse the politics of asymmetric information in the EDP and MIP. The authors examine how the Commission and the Council have sought to enforce the requirements of the Semester as an information-driven surveillance system reliant on national budgetary and economic statistics. They show that while the Six-Pack legislation gave the Commission the right to investigate the compilation of member state fiscal statistics and to impose financial sanctions for misconduct, the European Central Bank and the EP have so far blocked efforts to give Eurostat similar 'police patrol' powers to ensure the reliability of MIP statistics. The contribution focuses particularly on the imposition of financial penalties on Spain for the misrepresentation of fiscal statistics by the Autonomous Community of Valencia, the first such case in the history of Economic and Monetary

Union (EMU), whose distinctive circumstances provide insight into the rare conditions under which the Commission may be prepared to use its sanctioning powers over member states.

The sixth contribution, by Edgars Eihmanis [2017](#), examines the fascinating case of Latvia, which experienced severe economic difficulties during the financial crisis. Between 2008 and 2014, the country was simultaneously subject to three EU economic governance frameworks – the European Semester, a Balance-of-Payments programme and the euro convergence criteria. Eihmanis finds that the Latvian government ‘cherry-picked’ and instrumentalized EU fiscal and economic targets, which it often exceeded. In contrast to the literature portraying the Commission as a neoliberal actor pushing austerity at the expense of social protection, he shows that in this case it played the role of social policy advocate, repeatedly pressing the Latvian authorities for stronger measures to help the poor – with some eventual success. The case study thus sheds valuable light on the Semester’s influence on the relationship between the Commission and member state governments, as well as between economic and social policy objectives.

The seventh contribution, by Mark Hallerberg *et al.* [2017](#), analyses the role of national parliaments in the Semester. Based on original survey data, the authors trace whether national parliaments discuss and vote on national stability/convergence and reform programmes, as well as how their involvement has changed over time. They find considerable variation among national parliaments as to whether debates on the Semester take place at all, and if so in which committees at which stage of the process. Their research shows that between 2012 and 2015, Budget/Finance committees played an increasingly promising role in *ex ante* scrutiny of national planning documents as they became more aware of the Semester’s impingement on their core business. Counter-intuitively, however, it was parliaments in non-euro area member states not subject to potential financial sanctions which were most active in *ex post* review of the CSRs, suggesting that they were motivated more by the pursuit of electoral advantage through symbolic contestation of EU involvement in domestic reforms than by democratic concerns with the policy recommendations themselves.

Finally, the eighth contribution, by Ben Crum [2017](#), examines how the new economic governance of the euro area has affected the ability of parliaments (national and European) to scrutinize and control economic policy. It analyses the specific challenges to parliamentary accountability that emerge when executive power is shared between the national and the supranational levels. It argues that such accountability has been compromised in EU post-crisis economic governance because governments’ budgetary decisions are constrained by the Semester and national parliaments find themselves on the losing side of a reinforced two-level executive game, while the European Parliament lacks effective powers to control the decisions of the European

Council and the Commission in this field. The contribution concludes by proposing guidelines for safeguarding parliamentary accountability in multilevel settings like that of EU post-crisis economic governance, which the author believes would reinforce the Semester's character as a dialogical rather than hierarchical process.

4. Conclusion

This collection has sought to assess the European Semester as a new architecture of EU socioeconomic governance by examining its consequences along three critical axes: the economic and the social; the intergovernmental and the supranational; and the technocratic and the democratic. Taking the contributions together, we find that that changes introduced by the Semester cannot easily be captured by such polar oppositions, thereby challenging established theoretical understandings of EU governance.

With regard to the economic–social axis, our contributions show that these two poles of EU policy co-ordination have become increasingly closely intertwined within the Semester. Social objectives and actors have become more prominent and influential over time in the Semester's substantive policy orientations and governance procedures, including the drafting, review and adoption of the CSRs. But major national reforms in interdependent policy fields like pensions, health care, labour-market regulation and social security have both economic and social dimensions, which need to be taken into account in framing EU recommendations, even if officials from each domain might prefer to take decisions independently. While jurisdictional struggles persist around overlapping issues, especially those linked to the SGP and MIP, the contributions in this collection suggest that the Semester provides a workable, if still imperfect framework for integrating EU social and economic policy co-ordination, without sacrificing the objectives of either process.

On the intergovernmental–supranational axis, the contributions likewise show that there is no simple winner. Member states do not control the European Semester, nor have supranational institutions become all-powerful. Although the European Council formally remains the political master of the Semester, it cannot and does not run the process itself. The Commission plays a pivotal role in steering the Semester, having gained new powers and developed new capacities to set priorities, review national policies and performance, draft CSRs and propose sanctions under the EDP and MIP. But the Commission does not exercise these powers and capacities in isolation from national actors. Sectoral committees of member state officials, whose detailed knowledge of national policy challenges and developments far exceeds that of the Commission, have numerous opportunities to feed in their views at key moments in the Semester process and have demonstrated their ability to amend the Commission's draft CSRs, drawing on evidence from

their own complementary monitoring and review procedures. To enhance national ownership of proposed reforms, the Commission now engages in an increasingly intense bilateral and multilateral dialogue with a multiplicity of actors from the member states at each stage in the Semester cycle. Taken together, these developments have blurred the boundaries between 'European' and 'national' actors in EU policy co-ordination, and made it increasingly difficult – and perhaps even irrelevant – to characterize the Semester as either intergovernmental or supranational.

Criticism of the Semester has perhaps been harshest in relation to the technocratic–democratic axis. Such criticism has concentrated on the limited role of national and European parliaments in its decision-making processes. Yet the contributions in this collection show that national parliaments, especially within the euro area, have by no means fully exploited the opportunities available to them to debate the Semester's policy orientations or to scrutinize its recommendations. The EP, as previously noted, fought for the legislative codification of the Semester in its present form, as well as for the introduction of RQMV for financial sanctions. Given limitations of time and expertise, as well as the electoral incentives facing their members, it seems unrealistic to expect most national parliaments to play a more active part in scrutinizing the Semester process. While there is a stronger case for extending the EP's codecision role in setting the Semester's policy priorities and orientations, it could hardly be expected to participate effectively in reviewing and adopting the CSRs. Here, as the contributions in this collection show, it is within the apparently 'technocratic' components of the Semester – the 'core group' of Commission DGs and the sectoral committees of member state officials advising the Council – that much of the real contestation and debate about EU policy recommendations and the implementation of national reforms actually takes place. Hence, as with the other two axes, a sharp polarization between the Semester's democratic and the technocratic dimensions seems both empirically and conceptually misplaced.

The European Semester, like EU post-crisis governance more generally, is a work in progress. The Semester's policy content and decision-making procedures have evolved considerably since its creation in 2010, and further revisions have been mooted. The Five Presidents' Report (Juncker *et al.* 2015) envisaged using reinforced monitoring of national reforms within the Semester to drive convergence towards agreed binding standards, including in the social field, a proposal which reappears in the Commission's recent Reflection Paper on Deepening EMU (European Commission 2017b). It remains unclear for now how such arrangements would work in practice, and still more so how far member states would be prepared to embrace them. But our assessment of its first seven years suggests that the Semester has already reshaped the architecture of EU governance in ways that challenge established theoretical understandings, by integrating the pursuit of social and economic

objectives into an interactive cycle of deliberation between national and supranational actors in which peer review by expert officials enhances rather than restricts the scope for democratic debate.

Notes

1. For an overview of the Semester's place in the evolution of EU socioeconomic governance, see Zeitlin and Vanhercke (2014: 15–27); on the evolution of EU pre-crisis economic governance, see also Verdun (2009).
2. See: https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/european-semester/european-semester-timeline_en; <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-semester/how-european-semester-works/>; <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/file-european-semester-improvement> (accessed 26 July 2017).

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